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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000699

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USMISSION GENEVA FOR LABATT (JCHAMBERLIN)

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TAGS: [ELAB](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: CHAVEZ TAKES AIM AT UNION AUTONOMY/CTV PREPARES  
DEFENSE OF LABOR MOVEMENT

REF: CARACAS 000616

Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON,  
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. During his March 24 speech to promote the creation of a single, pro-government party, President Chavez called union autonomy a "capitalist trap" and demanded that unions join his proposed United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) as part of a "workers front." Manuel Cova, Secretary General of Venezuela's most important independent labor confederation, the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV), plans to raise concerns about Chavez' remarks, as well as ongoing government interference with union elections and collective bargaining at the May 29-June 14 ILO meeting. Cova also plans to accuse the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) of fomenting inter-union violence in the construction sector. Cova anticipates the BRV will remove CTV representatives from the BRV's ILO delegation and is seeking broader international -- including USG -- support for raising labor unions' concerns at the ILO. End Summary.

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Chavez: "Unions Should Not Be Autonomous"  
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¶2. (U) During a televised March 24 ceremony to swear in over 2000 promoters of President Chavez' proposed United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), Chavez exhorted trade unions to unite and to become an arm of the PSUV. Citing Lenin and Rosa Luxembourg, Chavez said trade unions should not fall into the "capitalist trap and trap of the bourgeois state" by insisting that unions be separate from political parties. He further complained that autonomous unions lack "strategic direction" and create a "mess." "We come not to make a mess; we come to make a revolution," bellowed Chavez to boisterous applause.

¶3. (SBU) In the same lengthy speech, Chavez also indirectly, but sharply, criticized the pro-government affiliates of the National Workers Union (UNT), noting that recently-created unions are almost all "poisoned with the same poison - union autonomy." He accused unions of confusing and dividing the working class and noted that he has not met with any unions recently due to their ongoing internal disputes. Unions could convert into a "little party on the side," but the PSUV will go directly to the factories to recruit workers to form an arm (or "workers front") of the PSUV. "Unity," Chavez commanded, "or get out of the way."

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CTV To Raise International Alarm Bells

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¶4. (C) Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV) Secretary General Manuel Cova told PolCouns March 30 that the CTV intends to raise concerns about Chavez' threats against union autonomy at the May 29-June 14 ILO meeting in Geneva. He showed a copy of a January 25 agreement signed by representatives of the CTV, the Ministry of Popular Power for Labor, and the pro-government UNT that ratifies a prior rotation agreement among opposition and pro-government labor federations. According to the rotation, the CTV can designate the workers' representatives on Venezuela's delegation to the next ILO meeting. In that capacity, Cova anticipates a speaking role. Cova has attended ILO meetings for the last five years as a international union delegate.

¶5. (C) Cova said he expects the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) to pull the plug on the CTV's participation on the BRV's official delegation at the last moment to prevent him from speaking out on government efforts to undermine unions and worker rights within Venezuela. In addition to Chavez recent statements on not needing any unions, Cova would like to raise the National Electoral Council's (CNE's) refusal to certify non-BRV union elections, freedom of expression concerns and government impediments to collective bargaining. Cova still plans to go to Geneva, even if the BRV removes the CTV as the workers' representatives on its ILO delegation.

¶6. (C) Cova said he has conveyed his concerns about Chavez' threats to union autonomy to the AFL-CIO. He is also requesting that the U.S. government's delegate to the next ILO meeting raise concerns about worker rights and the trade union movement in Venezuela. Cova said he would brief

CARACAS 00000699 002 OF 002

Embassy again in late April after he returned from an April 20-22 labor conference (with AFL-CIO participation) in Brazil.

¶7. (SBU) Separately, the Union of Press Workers is also approaching the ILO to seek protections for union activity in the wake of Chavez' March 24 remarks. Pro-government UNT leaders have refrained from criticizing Chavez' remarks on union autonomy. However, on March 12, UNT public sector union leader Franklin Rondon publicly criticized CNE delays in organizing internal union elections. (Note: the CNE has constitutional authority to administer all internal union elections and in 2004 issued union election regulations that many labor leaders believe violate freedom of association.)

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Violence in the Construction Sector  
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¶8. (C) Cova, who heads the most important independent construction union, also accused the BRV of organizing groups of criminals to attack and intimidate construction workers affiliated with the CTV in order to gain control of lucrative construction projects. He reported that clashes between CTV workers and phantom, criminal construction syndicates in recent years have led to some 130 deaths. Cova said the BRV provided these gangs with arms and protection, but lost control over them as the violence to control work sites escalated. He said the CTV has signed cooperation agreements with four pro-government construction unions in order to jointly -- and peacefully -- confront these groups. Cova plans to raise this issue in Geneva as well.

¶9. (U) The BRV to some extent acknowledges that violence among unions is a serious problem. The National Assembly recently created an investigatory commission to look into the assassination of union leaders in Bolivar State. Commission member Belkis Solis told the local media that there have been five union deaths in 2007, 40 deaths in 2006, and 70 in 2005. Commission members Juan Jose Molina and Adel El Zabayar have

already publicly blamed Bolivar State Governor Francisco Rangel Gomez and the state's court system, respectively, for the continued union violence.

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Comment  
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¶10. (C) Despite claiming to lead a "revolution" for the "people," President Chavez has been consistently hostile to organized labor, particularly in the wake of the 2002-2003 general strike against his government. While the Chavez government helped form and still gives preferential treatment to pro-government UNT unions, internecine fighting among Chavista union leaders has been a source of continued frustration and embarrassment within pro-government circles. Chavez' exhortation to union leaders and members alike to either join his PSUV party or stand aside makes clear what many union leaders already suspected -- Chavez is determined to extinguish what is left of the weak and struggling trade union movement in Venezuela.

¶11. (C) Ironically, the CTV was criticized in the past, including by Chavistas, as being subservient to the once-powerful Accion Democratica (AD) political party. Chavez' efforts to create a united "workers front" appear to be far more pernicious than the cozy AD-CTV relationship during Venezuela's heyday of two-party stable democracy. To date, rather than use the creation of the PSUV as a vehicle for trying to brandish his democratic credentials, Chavez instead is steamrolling any potential internal opponents from small pro-Chavez parties (reftel) to trade unions with his ham-handed "with me or agin' me" rhetoric. Many opposition leaders understandably fear that Chavez' efforts to forge a single pro-government party will be a weigh station to a one-party state.

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